

■ **My fellow managers and I are seeing an increasing number of employees having family problems. I am worried about layoffs and the impact they could have on already stressed employees. The EAP is great, but is there anything more managers can do?**

Meet with the EAP and discuss the issues affecting your employees. The employee assistance professional will listen and may offer suggestions that are appropriate for your role in supporting employees. Unfortunately, you can't address employees' personal problems, but that does not mean you can't make a significant impact. Employees always feel better about work when they are respected and valued as individuals. You can energize them in different ways such as reducing monotony, which can lead to improved morale. Examples can range from something as simple as holding a staff meeting outside on a nice day to giving employees ownership of their work by leaving some of the decisions regarding assignments up to them. Don't hesitate to meet with employees individually to field questions about relieving stress and bringing positivity to the workplace. You'll discover that employees often have great, implementable ideas for how you can support them. Remind employees that the EAP is a no-charge, confidential resource to help them deal with both personal and workplace stress.

■ **A few employees were in the break room telling "blonde" jokes. No other employees were there, but I felt uncomfortable with the banter, so I asked them to change the subject. Did I overreact? One employee always seems to be the instigator in these kinds of exchanges.**

You aren't overreacting. It was a smart move to interrupt. Employees must be more self-aware and careful of their behavior in the workplace. Laws and penalties have grown increasingly severe for employers when work environments are proven to be hostile or offensive. A pattern of these types of exchanges makes that easy to prove, and a legal case is strengthened when supervisors don't step in to stop it. It's even worse if they are participants. As employees become more friendly and familiar with each other, it is natural for boundaries to loosen and requires prudent supervision to step in when necessary. If one of your employees has more difficulty than others in demonstrating appropriate behavior, consider your options for correcting it. The EAP is a resource to assist both supervisors and employees.

■ I know it's said that managers are not "born," they're made. But, isn't it true that some managers easily attract employees to their way of thinking with magnetic traits that can't be taught? Can the EAP help me be a better leader?

The skills of leadership are learned, but some people do possess personalities with more personal charm and "magnetism" than others. This is called charisma. Not all great leaders are charismatic, however, and not all charismatic people are good leaders. Leadership skills are important, which is why leadership is studied intensely. There are leadership schools, courses and training that teach recognized styles of leadership, theories, research, and accepted practices. Nearly anyone can learn to apply effective leadership skills. Factors of effective leadership include: 1) how you speak to employees, 2) logic used to convey direction and inspiration, and 3) techniques for enlisting contributions from others in pursuit of a goals. The EAP can help troubleshoot personal roadblocks that sometimes interfere with leadership skills such as assertiveness, effective listening, empathic reasoning, self-awareness, and more. The WA State Department of Personnel provides training and resources to support leadership education goals. Check out available courses at www.dop.wa.gov/training.

■ I don't think employees cope with stress as well as past generations did. Is this true or is there more stress now than 25 or 30 years ago?

Compared to decades ago, the acceleration of technology, rapid communications, competition for resources, greater degrees of financial and retirement insecurity, and the breakdown of family have contributed to what some call a "stress epidemic." It's a misconception that people can't handle stress as well as they once did. There will always be people who can cope with stress more effectively and demonstrate resilience. But, it is true the stress level in a society matches the pace of change that society experiences. The pace of change is clearly accelerating, and it is also more unpredictable. EAPs play an important role in helping employees and workplaces not only cope with stress but also to thrive in spite of it.

■ Are there any common myths about illicit/illegal drug use that interfere with supervisor referrals to the EAP?

The most common supervisory myths about illicit drug use are the beliefs that an employee who abuses drugs will *look like a drug user*, will appear to be an *antiestablishment type*, or will exhibit obvious drug-affected behavior on the job. These stereotypes have continued for nearly 50 years. It is still a challenge to help supervisors get past stereotypes when training them to use the EAP as a resource and tool to intervene with troubled employees. Modern-day EAPs emerged in the mid-1970s to help address these misconceptions by educating supervisors to stop looking for addicts or drug users and instead to start referring employees to the EAP based on performance, conduct or attendance problems. Training focuses on doing this without regard to one's suspicion regarding drug use. The result of this major shift in addressing substance abuse issues in the workplace was an increase in referrals of alcohol and drug addicted employees so they could receive assistance, including appropriate referrals for treatment and support.